STAT

Airman's Bookshelf

Dept. of Dirty Tricks, Mark I

OSS—The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency, by R. Harris Smith. University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1972. 458 pages. $10.95.

With a shake-up of some sort apparently due at CIA, this new history of the Office of Strategic Services—the predecessor wartime agency—reminds us how this nation first became committed to supporting a "Department of Dirty Tricks." Critics may ask how any country, and particularly one seemingly dedicated to saving the free world, justifies activities by its intelligence-gathering apparatus that are widely interpreted as meddling in the internal affairs of other nations. This fact-packed book indicates how CIA became "a mirror image of OSS" by tracing the creation and wartime history of the parent agency.

The author, once a CIA research analyst and now a lecturer in political science at the University of California Extension, has chosen a "popular history" approach to what must have been a wealth of detailed information about long-forgotten missions. He has organized his material into chapters covering broad outlines of OSS activity in each successive theater of action as the war developed, illustrating an absorbing story with operational specifics. The result is straightforward history, which nevertheless conveys the climate of wartime espionage in Occupied Europe and the Far East. As Germany faced defeat, the brash young agency sent more of its operatives to the Orient, where they met a chilly reception indeed.

The founding father of OSS was William Joseph Donovan, a Wall Street lawyer whose personality shaped the agency and determined its working methods to a degree which, in many instances, has remained unaltered in CIA. The author makes clear that intervention—often heavy handed—in political affairs of underdeveloped nations became the CIA norm because the agency retained the OSS mandate for political warfare acquired in wartime struggles against fascism.

Another contributing factor was introduced by continuing the OSS "tradition of dissent" among CIA field operatives who, in the author's words, often undertook "arrogant adventures" because they had "developed operational independence from a relatively enlightened staff at CIA headquarters."

Some argue that the cold war necessitated extending the "dirty-tricks" period into post-World War II years and that only later changes in the foreign affairs scene have made such behavior anachronistic, requiring a thorough shake-up of agency attitudes.

A fascinating parade of OSS employees passes through these pages. Some are now famous in other contexts—Arthur Goldberg and Julia Child, for example. There is, of course, the obligatory chapter on Allan Dulles and his well-publicized contacts with enemy representatives seeking surrender. There were blue bloods, intellectuals, political activists, movie actors, crowned heads, corporate magnates, and patriotic nobodies. Most possessed unusual talent, administrative ability, technical know-how, or other outstanding characteristics. OSS attracted able employees as well as unstable thrill seekers. The author tells us where they are now in a spate of footnotes—in some chapters almost one to a page.

To cope with snobbish British intelligence, Donovan staffed the London office with a corps of blue bloods. But in field operations, rifts between OSS and British Special Operations people developed early in the game. Generally, the Americans would back anybody who could get the work done, Communists included. The British, in most cases, sponsored the conservative, rightist element and, if there was one, the deposed monarch.

Successful efforts by the Allies to work out differences and cooperate may have helped to save postwar France from civil war. But in Greece and Yugoslavia, failure to cooperate may have helped escalate conflict between local guerrilla groups.

The passage of time points up other contradictions. Original OSS field recruits were idealistic for the most part, disliking power politics, and, yet, from the time Operation Torch (the invasion of North Africa) they became increasingly involved in political maneuverings.

Donovan was a "can-do" type who impressed military men, and yet, in crucial days in the Far East, his operatives foundered because of their failure to win over General MacArthur and, at least initially, General Stilwell.

As background for today's headlines, the most intriguing sections deal with events in China and Vietnam as Japan lost her grip and paradoxical Allied policies laid the groundwork for future trouble. Those who survived the events of the time provide rare anecdotes.

One OSS group sent with the French to Hanoi was the first US unit to make contact with Ho Chi Minh. OSS Maj. Frank White recalls a chilly dinner with Ho and members of his cabinet, attended by French, Chinese, British, and Americans. Seated last in the only vacant chair, next to Ho, White remembers: "The dinner was a horror. The French confined themselves to the barest minimum of conversation and scarcely spoke to the Chinese. . . ." White, referring to his place at the head of the table observed to Ho, "I think, Mr. President, there is some resentment over the seating arrangement at this table." Ho replied, "Yes, I can see that, but who else could I talk to?"

—Reviewed by Marjorie Ulsamer, Deputy Director, Publications Division, HUD, and a former CIA employee.

STAT